



From Here to Infinity

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From here to Infinity



In Seamus Heaney's *Station Island* the poet embarks on a journey through memory, ritual and time. It is a pilgrimage that is a parallel journey: an actual physical journey to St Patrick's Purgatory Island on Lough Derg (which Heaney had visited several times), with that of an inner journey to confront his past, his creative conscience and the circumstances he then found himself in. It was perhaps a turning point for Heaney, as it became a form of creative renewal, reasserting his belief in continuing his search through poetry.

Part of the power of *Station Island* is its exploration of time. Architecture of all the arts is perhaps the most embedded in aspects of time. A building can soon become a ruin, in cycles of time that only archaeologists can know, while we as architects are caught in the incessant rush to build to impossible deadlines, flattening any wider sense of time. But time measures architecture through a different lens.

Christopher Schaub's *Architecture of Infinity* is a cinematic pilgrimage through architecture and time. It is a search by the Swiss filmmaker for a personal measure of time and infinity. He looks beyond a limited sense of our place in a temporal world, to explore the edges of our understanding of what architecture can do in locating us within a bigger picture of an infinite universe.

Much as Heaney had a well-established body of work before *Station Island*, so too has Schaub, before embarking on this particular journey. While working across different aspects of film making -including several full-length feature films- the last twenty years has seen him making a number of documentaries

focusing on architecture. Working with architects such as Peter Zumthor, Herzog & de Meuron, Santiago Calatrava and Peter Meili, he has explored architecture through a highly crafted and unique insight.

His first film on architecture featured the remarkable Il Girasole -which translates from Italian as Sunflower- designed by Angelo Invernizzi, which is a villa outside Verona built on a mechanism to allow it to turn and follow the sun. It revealed a deep-seated interest in architecture, and the nature of time perceived through the shifting patterns of light, shadow and space.

Architecture of Infinity looks specifically towards the sacred for a measure of infinity: to find the spiritual in both the ordinary as well as the ecclesiastical. Accompanied by several architects and artists on his journey, and who in a sense revisit their own personal journeys within the film, they all offer insights and memories into their creativity, by reflecting on what they have made, why they have made it, and what has inspired them. Sometimes the inspiration is people, or particular circumstances, sometimes it is in knowing history, but in most cases it begins in childhood.

The film opens with the director's own childhood memories. They are confessional and direct, spoken openly in the search for spiritual meaning. The voice over and imagery redirects our thoughts back into a more primordial simplicity of our perceptions of the world: playing at the beach, moving through the space of a forest, or to catch the unseen movement of a cornfield caught by a brief gust of wind. Light becomes central to

all this, measured at the horizon of the sea, or above our heads in the flickering shadows of the forest canopy. We are both in and out of time: observer and participant. The temporality and fragility of making our first sand building at the beach, is filmed here in order mark the beginning of our journey through architecture and time.

Schaub's interest in ecclesiastical architecture becomes evident as we enter the portal of the first church. The camera movement is highly controlled leading slowly into the semi darkness. Our eyes adjust to begin a search that will take us through many different sacred spaces. If it is the optic eye of the camera which captures cinematic space, it is there to replicate our body and its movement, which is the true register of architectural space.

The first voice to appear on the journey -after the director's- is that of Peter Zumthor, who describes the small Bruder Klaus Chapel and why he took it on as a commission. Partly in dedication to his mother, and partly in recognition and admiration of a particular man's need to give thanks for his life after a serious illness. We walk together with the man and his wife on their daily journey to pray in the space and to open it for the many architectural pilgrims that visit it. The filming is beautifully sequenced as we arrive and move through the mesmerising space, looking up to capture the light from above, flooding down like an inverted well across the scalloped scorched surfaces of the chapel. The camera meticulously captures where our gaze would have taken us. We are as close to the real experience as we can be through this carefully constructed filming.

Afterwards we walk with Zumthor on his own journey into sacred space, as he recalls and revisits spaces that have inspired him. He, like each of the architects and artists in the film, returns to his childhood memories and perceptions, as an inner voice, which has guided him in his work.

Artist Cristina Iglesias working in Madrid ask us to think again about the ground we stand on, and where we come from, while musician Jojo Mayer beats out time physically on architecture, in Peter Märkli's La Congiunta: rich in reverberation.

James Turrell appears like a biblical Moses, speaking from the book of Art. He recalls his childhood discovery of the relationship between light and dark by creating pinholes to shape constellations of light through the blackout curtains required during the war in Los Angeles. Through his work he turns our senses towards that of the passing of time, through reflecting on the nature of light, shadow and the shifting patterns of the sky, all to locate us in the temporal world with a stronger sense of the infinite.

There are many resonances with the films of Wim Wenders, such as the use of the director's voice over. The 1989 film *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* on the work of Yohji Yamamoto in particular comes to mind. The voice over questioning and searching for meaning amidst what essentially is a road movie. With Schaub it is road movie in search of the infinite.

Alvaro Siza's Santa Maria Church at Marco de Canavezes is captured in its lived-in, paint flaking, material quality. Adrift in



a sea of chaotic urban development, it registers for a particular community a space of beauty and ritual. Inside an old man sits praying alone by the window, while a mother walks up and down the aisle comforting her crying baby. The span of life is framed and captured in this remarkable space through film. Siza tells us ‘...that maybe there is always something sacred in architecture, in the relationship between things.’ I had heard of but not actually seen –until this film- Siza’s practice of getting his secretary to cover the health warnings on his cigarette packets with white address stickers, which he then proceeds to draw on. An alchemical process of transformation through drawing, of what he considers too harsh a reality to see first thing in the morning.

My own favourite section in the film is with Peter Märkli. Alone in his studio in Zurich, drawing and reflecting on architecture, he describes a journey he made to see the Romanesque churches in Saintonge in France. Constructed over many years, and layered with the shifts and changes of different hands and building practices, they are beautiful tableaux of time revealing perhaps the true nature of architecture in their fabric. Suggesting he was not aware of them prior to designing his La Congiunta Museum in Giornico, it is impossible now to see this remarkable building without feeling the resonances and echoes of these extraordinary buildings. His knowledge of medieval philosophy and theology, and his own unique approach to drawing, marks Märkli out as an important voice in this journey and in contemporary architecture.

This is a beautifully made and moving film. It is I think a turning point in Schaub’s oeuvre in determining without doubt his remarkable insight and empathy with architecture. It can and does sustain many viewings, by the sheer quality of its craft, not to mention the entrancing soundscape which is an integral part of the vision. Through the long narrow aspect ratio, and painterly framing, architecture has never looked so good on the big screen. Neither has the importance and richness of historical buildings been woven into film making with such visual and associative power.

At the end of *Station Island* a figure appears to take the poet’s hand and to guide him safely back onto land from the pilgrim’s boat and his journey. The figure is uncertain at first, but soon becomes recognisable as James Joyce. He appears Virgil like to guide the poet as he moves back into life, away from the visions he has seen on the Island and to advise him how to proceed with his work. It’s a transformative moment; a reawakening and a renewal of creative vows.

In Schaub’s film there is this same sense of revelation and epiphany. The director seems to shed the burden of his childhood search to find meaning in the sacred spaces of his youth -which he relates directly to the early loss of his father. This he now transforms -through this filmic pilgrimage- guided by the various voices to that of a richer sense of what the sacred and infinite can be, and as a celebration of the quotidian.

As the film concludes we are taken through a cinematic phantasm

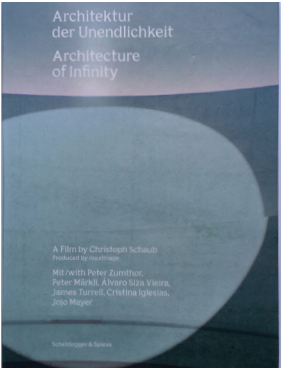
of imagery: a richly layered montage of colour and movement, which in effect symbolises the transformation and shift in the director’s philosophy. The soft chanting prayers, the sensual movements of a dancer to Jojo Mayer’s rhythmic drumming, the face of a Madonna set amidst the kaleidoscopic patterns of a cathedral’s window iridescent in light, all now combine to mark out a sense of passage through cinematic montage.

So has the search begun at the start of the film revealed anything? Where is infinity? Have the architectural pilgrims found their spiritual home? The film offers an answer: infinity is in that small pocket of sky above us as children at the beach when we build our imagined buildings; it is in the shape of the moving clouds caught by the oculi of Peter Zumthor’s Bruder Klaus Chapel; it is in the pure circles of James Turrell’s windows to the cosmos; and it is in the long slot window, looking out into life, from within the luminescent box of tricks that is Alvaro Siza’s church.

Through cinema we have witnessed, and been guided, in a quest to find meaning: to find a source well to infinity. Schaub suggests this is buried deep in ourselves, in our childhood, and in the architecture we have seen anew through the looking glass of cinema.

Infinity is all around us. As Schaub concludes, ‘I am the architect of my own infinity.’

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Architecture of Infinity
A Film by Christoph Schaub

With a contribution by Friedhelm Mennekes
and an interview with Christoph Schaub by Susanne Schnell
and Louise Blättler

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